

Old Newgate Prison

If you travel from Colebrook to Bradley Field along Conn. Route 20, shortly before coming to East Granby, there is an intersection and if you are attentive, a sign pointing to the left indicates that Old Newgate Prison lies somewhere beyond the bend and past the all-obscuring trees.

Today this museum belongs to the State of Connecticut, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon, as I well remember going there more than once when it belonged to the Viets family, in whose possession it had been since early colonial times.

The first use of the land was as a copper mine. In 1737 the then owner, Samuel Higley, began issuing three-penny tokens. As hard cash was very scarce in colonial times, there was a market for any coin, regardless of its composition. Higley's neighbor's complained that these tokens were overvalued, and as a result he changed the reverse legend from "3 pence" to "Value me as you please", but still retained the Roman numeral three for three pence. Today, these are extremely rare coins. There were five variations, having two dates: 1737 and 1739. Their value, as of 2008, varied from a low of \$6,500 to a high of \$60,500. One contributing factor to their low number was that they were made of very pure copper, and hence were apt to be melted down for other purposes.

On December 2, 1773, the Colonial Legislature approached the landowner, John Viets, who now made his living by conducting a tavern across the street, and convinced him that he would make an excellent prison keeper. The old mine had been made escape-proof by closing the drain and a few of the subterranean passages, capping the main shaft with a heavy iron grill, and building a guardhouse over it. For an expenditure of \$375, the colony had an impregnable prison. The jail was nothing more than a dank, dismal cavern with one accessible entrance, down which a forty-foot ladder led to the depths from the guardhouse. Year round the temperature remained about 50 degrees, and the only sound was the everlasting rhythmical drip of water, and the only light was what filtered down the well shaft. It was with a feeling of confidence that the Legislature turned the new facility over to John Viets; 22 days later he was given his first charge.

The first prisoner assigned to the new facility was a young man by the name of John Hinson. Hinson was no ordinary prisoner. He was an elusive character who had done time in half a dozen county jails between escapades as peddler of stolen wares, imposter at church fairs and general transgressor of Connecticut's blue laws. With his glib manner he could talk his way out of scrapes almost as fast as he got into them, and usually succeeded in talking his way out of county jails as well. The judge who turned Hinson over to jailer Viets warned, "he is sly, ornery and cunning as a viper. If there is any way of breaking out of Simsbury jail, Hinson will find it."

Everything went smoothly until the night of December 22. A full-blown winter storm covered the entire area; heavy, wet snow two feet deep covered the ground and began breaking branches from the trees. John Viets, his tavern and taproom empty of customers, and with no prospects of seeing any, spent his evening in the guardhouse feeling sorry for himself as well as for his prisoner. To break the monotony, he would call down the shaft every so often, exchanging comments as to whether the climate was better on the surface or down in the depths.

Then, about midnight, Viets detected a strange creaking noise out in the yard. The snow was falling so fast that he could barely see more than six feet, and the clumps of snow falling from branches along with occasional branches themselves breaking off and landing in the snow, filled the air with a cacophony of natural sounds. Reassured that what he had heard was of natural causes, he closed the door and resumed his seat in the guardhouse. Then as an afterthought, he called one more time down the shaft, but this time there was no answer. This was strange, as Hinson was a light sleeper. Viets unlocked the ponderous trap door, and taking a club and a lantern, descended the ladder. Hinson's bunk was empty, and his few personal possessions were missing. Eventually he ransacked every inch of the underground caverns and passageways, but Hinson was not there. The Simsbury prison was empty.

The leave-taking was the first of many mysterious departures from Connecticut's trusted jail, but failure to detain inmates for long never seemed to weaken the faith of lawmakers in its impregnability. As fast as miscreants and derelicts could be rounded up, they were put into Viets' custody, and they absconded almost as fast. A trio confined in February made their getaway early in April. Sometimes prisoners disappeared singly, sometimes en masse. One resourceful desperado chose to remain only four days.

Guards were doubled and quadrupled, and still the breaks continued. The top of the well shaft was fitted with a grate as ponderous as the entrance hatch. Hourly checks were made on the prisoners below ground, many of whom were shackled and chained in solitary cells. A crusty old militia officer succeeded Viets; the guards were frequently changed. Still the Simsbury mine couldn't contain its convicts.

Sometimes it was weeks or months before the mystery of an escape was solved, but generally the truth boiled down to this: prisoners had too many helpful friends at large. "We believe it is not possible for any person to escape unless by assistance from abroad," reported the embarrassed overseers to the General Assembly.

That is the way Hinson had left, but with him romance had entered the plot. His rescuer, it turned out, was a faithful mistress who had tramped over the snow-bound hills with a 100 foot coil of rope over her shoulder, and let it down the well shaft.

To prevent this sort of thing from happening again, half-ton stones were cemented over the top of the well shaft, nearly covering the iron grating so that only a narrow slit for ventilation remained. Over the main entrance a sturdy two-story blockhouse was constructed of timbers ten inches square. The work was done with the help of prison labor under armed guard. Somehow every last one of the laborers slipped away before the roof was on.

For a time it appeared that those caverns on the side of Talcott Mountain weren't going to be any more successful as a prison than they had been as a copper mine. It was in 1705 that the local citizens first became aware of a report that a mine of either silver or copper had been discovered in town. For the next 70 years one corporation after another sprang up – in Hartford, New York, Boston, London and even in Sweden – to finance mining operations. Altogether around a million dollars was sunk in those hills, in a day when three or four thousand dollars was a lavish sum to expend on a single colonial enterprise. Tons of yellow-blue copper ore were taken out of Talcott Mountain, but the ore was of a poor grade, and the copper was hard to extract. Few of the investors ever got their money back.

Old Newgate Prison, Part II

Finally, in 1773, the Connecticut legislature decided that the colony itself should give it a try, using prison labor. For the bargain bid of \$375, an unexpired lease was purchased and the mines “fortified.” The idea was to have a few expert miners employed with the prisoners, and after a larger blockhouse was constructed, picks and shovels were doled out to the convicts. But the system didn’t work. Miners became too friendly with prisoners and too readily entered into their escape plans. Furthermore, the tools required for mining were just the tools needed for escape. Mining and penology didn’t mix.

With this failure rate, it is probable that Simsbury prison would have been abandoned if the rebels of Lexington and Concord had held their fire. The Revolution introduced a demand for prison lodgings exactly on the order of Simsbury’s.

Between 1773 and 1775 practically every prisoner confined there had managed to escape in one way or another, yet word of the dungeon’s horrors had spread faster than news of its insecurity. In derision the place had been dubbed “Newgate,” after England’s more formidable stronghold, but as awe-inspiring descriptions of underground life at Simsbury circulated, the name stuck.

Confidently the overseers reported to the General Assembly that every possible exit had been cut off, that they were prepared to take on the most incorrigible outlaws. [Sound familiar?]

This time the overseers were not the only ones who had confidence in the security measures. From Cambridge, Massachusetts on December 11, 1775, an important gentleman then engaged in putting his country on a war footing addressed a note to the Committee of Safety at Simsbury:

“Gent: The prisoners which will be delivered you with this, having been tried by a Court Martial, and deemed to be such flagrant and atrocious villains that they cannot by any means be set at large or confined in any place near this camp, were sentenced to be sent to Symsbury in Connecticut; you will therefore be pleased to have them secured in your Jail....so that they cannot possibly make their escape.... I am, &c

George Washington”

With the arrival of this contingent of Tories, Simsbury’s Newgate was in business as the first national penitentiary. Crowded into the black underground caverns was every type of criminal, from political dissidents to murderers to young boys doing three months for misdemeanors. They were provided with musty straw to sleep on, led forth in chains every morning at four o’clock for compulsory labor in the nail factory, provided with half-edible food, given countless lashes for disobedience and returned at four o’clock in the afternoon seventy feet underground.

Existence in the Simsbury dungeon was so unbearable that getting out was the one incentive that kept its inmates alive. All the time-tested methods of escape from prison were tried. One attained freedom by substituting his body for that of a corpse. Men waited for weeks for the opportunity to slug their guards and attempt to fight their way out. Others pooled their meager resources for a bribe big enough to persuade an attendant to leave a door unlocked for a single member to escape – only one escapee per fee.

The year 1776 brought the first crude mass attempt to burn a way to freedom. During the days of mining operations a long drainage channel large enough for a man to

crawl through had been blasted from the lowest floor level to the outer hill slope. The overseers had closed it with a massive oak door studded with iron. Attempts to break down the door or to chip away at it had proved fruitless, so the inmates decided to try burning it. Over a period of weeks quantities of kindling were smuggled below, a little at a time, until at last there was enough for a sizable bonfire. It was piled against the door, and a blaze was started with a flint. For a time the fire burned merrily as the flames licked at the wooden barricade. The prisoners were confident that the door would be demolished in an hour or two. However, there was no one among them with a sufficiently scientific turn of mind to foresee the combined effect of the noxious fumes and the limited supply of oxygen. Gasping, hysterical men scrambled to save themselves, but there was nowhere to turn. One by one they were overcome.

Above, the guards saw the smoke and knew what the result would be below. They waited, and after the fire had burned itself out and the air had cleared, they carried out the dead and the unconscious.

Immediately, all the survivors were crowded into a small holding space beneath the blockhouse while the drain was plugged with stone and mortar. It was an unwise move, for in their anger about the overcrowding, the inmates set fire to the timbered ceiling, and all might have perished in the flames. But in the ensuing confusion the guards lost their heads – and most of their charges as well.

The number of Tories and culprits ready to take the place of any escapees seemed inexhaustible. The blockhouse was quickly rebuilt, stronger than ever, with a whipping stall, separate dungeons in the basement, and double hatchways at the main shaft entrance. Some thirty desperadoes were ushered through it into the caverns, and this was the group that staged Simsbury's most famous break.

At the time, the confinement of the prisoners was considered so essential to the welfare of the country that the guard was increased to twenty-four privates under a corporal, a sergeant, and a lieutenant. (Actually, strong parallels can be drawn between Newgate during the Revolution and the Guantanamo retention center in today's war against international terrorism.) The privates were required at all times to carry loaded muskets with bayonets fixed; the officers, cutlasses and pistols. There were almost as many guards as prisoners, and in their sense of strength came a relaxing of the harsh ways. They began treating their charges with a degree of civility that included an occasional visitor.

Old Newgate Prison, Part III

Abigail, wife of prisoner Jonathan Young, presented herself to the lieutenant late on the night of May 18, 1781. She begged permission to spend an hour with her husband, submitted to a careful search of her person and was escorted to the hatch at the top of the shaft.

But Abigail's call was not unexpected, either by Jonathan or his associates. It was part of a carefully plotted escape plan. On the ladder leading down the shaft were mounted most of the prisoners, armed with stones or any piece of metal they had been able to sneak into their quarters. No sooner was the hatch unlocked than strong arms from below heaved it upward, and the desperadoes poured forth. The officers were

quickly overpowered, and their arms taken. Privates on night duty surrendered easily, and those asleep were given little chance to resist. Several prisoners were severely gashed by their own comrades during the scuffle in the dark, but by midnight every convict able to travel was over the hill. Behind them they left one dying officer, six privates stabbed or shot, and the entire company of jailers, regardless of their condition, locked in the dungeon. It was morning before the breakout was discovered, and by then it was too late to recover more than a handful of the escapees.

That break from what was often regarded as the strongest prison on the American side of the Atlantic was a painful embarrassment to Connecticut. The legislature was in session in Hartford at the time, and not a day was lost in starting an investigation. The strongest censure was reserved for the members of the guard. "A young man more fit to carry fish to market than to keep guard at Newgate!" they flung at Jacob Southwell, who had had sense enough to remain out of the fray. "A small lad just fit to drive a plow with a very gentle team," was the sarcastic charge cast at Nathan Phelps.

But that wasn't the end of Newgate. With the same unyielding resolution demonstrated after other Revolutionary defeats, colonial officials once more patched up the prison and repopulated it; rough, tough, brutal guards were substituted for the lenient ones.

In spite of these changes, in the five years that Newgate served as a penitentiary for the Continental government, over half the prisoners had escaped, yet despite the breaks, the riots and the fires, the makeshift jail somehow retained its name as the most formidable stronghold in the country.

With the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty, federal interest in the facility faded, but Connecticut never lost faith in their bastille. In 1790 it was formally constituted the permanent state prison; new workshops for the convicts and a comfortable brick dormitory for the guards were added, and the half-acre yard was enclosed in a sturdy log palisade topped with spikes. The wooden barrier proved to be much too destructible, so the prisoners were put to work replacing it with a great stone wall twelve feet high with a moat on the western side.

From nail making, the prison industry branched out into coopering, blacksmithing, manufacturing wagons and plows, producing boots and shoes and woven baskets. Over the years most of the parade ground inside the walls became crowded with little factories. A stone chapel with a picturesque spire was added, as well as a hospital, quarters for female convicts, and a thirty-foot treadmill wheel for grinding grain. In spite of all the improvements, Simsbury's jail was still a miserable place for the prisoners. On the steps of the treadmill marched the incorrigible and the defiant, through endless hours, often chained to their places, an overseer standing by with a ready whip.

Newgate became one of early America's great showplaces. During the early 1800s tourists traveled many miles to gaze upon the walled citadel reminiscent of a Rhineland castle on a hillside. A journalist who visited in 1807 was allowed to tour the facilities and subsequently wrote an account that portrays conditions at that time. Prisoners being moved from one location to another were so heavily chained that they had to move by small jumps rather than by walking. When they reached their place of work, the chains were substituted for neck chains secured to the ceiling.

The journalist was escorted down the ladder to the dungeon below, commonly referred to by the inmates as "Hell." He found the floor covered with thick, pasty slime,

the odors unbearable, bunks of wet straw crawling with vermin, seepage from the walls trickling into the living quarters everywhere. The noon meal consisted of pickled pork, thrown by the guards on the floor of the forge, where it was then picked up, washed and boiled in the same water that had been used to cool the iron wrought at the forges. The evening meal consisted of corn meal mush 365 days a year.

Punishment for refusing to work or for disobeying orders included reduction in ration allowance, flogging, hanging by the heels, double or triple sets of irons, and confinement in the stocks below ground.

Connecticut felt far from apologetic about its dungeon. "Public opinion in this state would not support an establishment which was inhuman or unnecessarily rigorous," wrote Governor Oliver Wolcott. "The people are, however, economical, and are not willing that rogues should become dangerous to society, or inconveniently burdensome to honest men."

Through a continual succession of fires, breaks and savage riots, Newgate held its own until 1827, when the old mine tunnels were finally abandoned as a prison, and the convicts moved to the comforts of a modern institution at Wethersfield. Sociologists were advancing a new theory that prisoners might be reformed under less stern discipline.

On September 28, 1827, the night before the final evacuation to Wethersfield, there was one last fling at escape. Abel Starkey, with 17 years of his sentence for counterfeiting still ahead of him, could afford to be reckless. For \$50 he bribed a guard to leave the rope and water bucket hanging in the seventy-foot shaft, which evidently, by this time, once again had a more or less open top. Hand over hand he climbed up the frayed old rope, but before he reached the top the rope snapped, and Abel was plunged to his death in "Hell."

It was indeed like Hell, in all respects except one: the souls condemned to suffer there had the hope- never vain and often substantiated – of escape to the cool, clean air of freedom.

Research for this article came from The Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911 edition, "Stone Walls do not a Prison Make" by W. Storrs Lee, published in the February, 1967 "American Heritage" and publications of the Connecticut Historical Society.

Historic Bytes

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